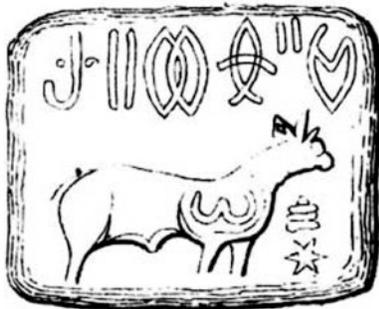


The First Harappan Forgery: Indus Inscriptions in the Nineteenth Century¹

Steve Farmer
saf@safarmer.com

The history of Indus research involves more than its share of quackery, self-deception, and outright fraud. The most amusing example of the latter was N.S. Rajaram's forgery of a 'horse seal' at the start of the twenty-first century — concocted to support the Hindutva political fiction that Indus and Vedic cultures were one.² Other recent forgeries, with opposing political purposes, include supposed finds by Dravidian scholars of Indus inscriptions on Tamil village walls.³ Other examples of similar types can be cited.

Interestingly, the story of the first Indus forgery did not involve Indian nationalists but a prominent nineteenth-century Western researcher — the comparative linguist and Sinologist Terrien de Lacouperie. The story has a moral attached, which makes it worth retelling.



The story begins when Alexander Cunningham published the first reproduction of a Harappan seal in the *Report for the Year 1872-3 of the Archaeological Survey of India* (1875). On the left is a reproduction of the drawing Cunningham published of this first inscription, which was the only Indus seal known until 1886 — and still only one of three Harappan inscriptions published over the next forty-five years.



C-17 A
(flipped horizontally)

I often wonder how differently the past 130 years of Indus research would have been if the first inscription that had turned up was one that had a much less linear look to it — perhaps like one of the marvelous mythological examples from Chanhudaro (or Chanhujodaro) seen on the left and right (both are shown as if they were seal impressions). It is certainly not likely that anyone would have claimed at the time that these were examples of an 'undeciphered script.' When more linear appearing inscriptions did crop up, anyone claiming that they contained 'writing' would have undoubtedly been asked to provide evidence for their case.



Mackay 1943, Plate LI

None of this happened, of course. Despite the fact that only one inscription was at hand — and a badly mutilated one at that — Cunningham, the first Director General of the Archaeological

¹ Thanks to Victor Mair and Michael Witzel for help piecing together various bits of this little moral tale.

² Michael Witzel and Steve Farmer, "Horseplay in Harappa: The Indus Valley Decipherment Hoax," *Frontline* (Cover Story, 13 October 2000): 4-14. To download this article and a number of later pieces involving Rajaram's archaeological-political fakery, see <http://www.safarmer.com/frontline>.

³ See, e.g., R. Madhivanan, *Indus Script among Dravidian Speakers* (Madras, 1995). The editor tells us at the start that Indus Valley society originated among ancient Tamils who created a "rich civilization which had flourished for millions of years." We later find that "vestiges and remnants" of this multimillion-year-old civilization are alive and well in South India, as evidenced by photos in Madhivanan's book of fresh Indus inscriptions on village walls.

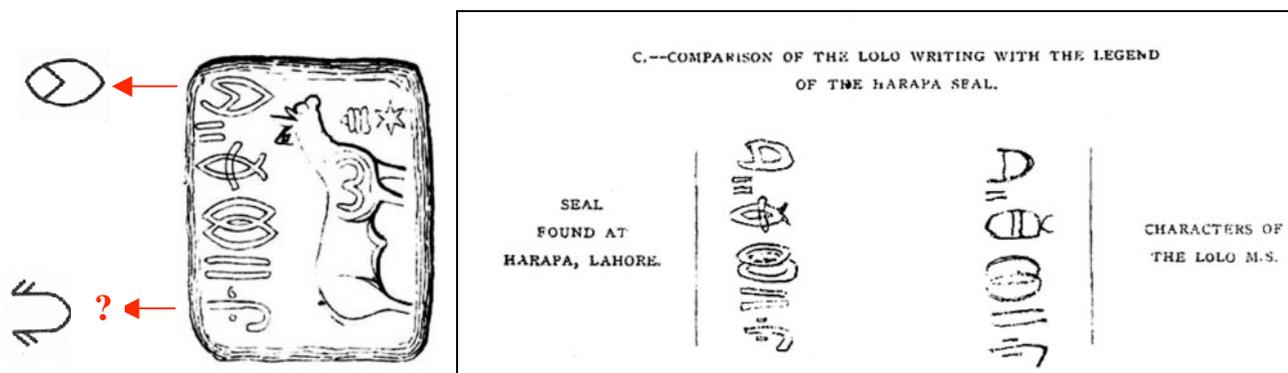
Survey of India, had no doubts that the inscription was evidence of a writing system. After first briefly declaring that the inscription was foreign, in 1877 Cunningham announced that the ‘writing’ on the seal was the archetype of the early Brahmi script used by Aśoka — and provided a tentative decipherment to boot. The 125-year comic history of the ‘decipherment’ of this would-be script had begun.

Five years later, the second act in the comedy began when Terrien de Lacouperie published an article in the prestigious *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1882) that claimed that the Indus seal was written in the tribal Chinese Lolo (or Yi) script. (For discussion of the Yi script, see Dingxu Shi in Bright and Daniels, *The World’s Writing Systems* 1996: 239 ff.). Lacouperie backed his claims by faking a little evidence, N.S. Rajaram style.

The aim of this forgery, which went undetected for 120 years, was not political but academic. Lacouperie used his fudged data to support his widely discussed theories, summarized at the end of his article, concerning supposed links between Old World scripts stretching from Mesopotamia to China. According to part of Lacouperie’s model, Indian scripts had an Indo-Chinese origin — a view that he claimed was verified by Cunningham’s seal. Lacouperie’s theories were quite popular, and he continued making his claims about the Indus seal until his death in 1894.

To compare the first Indus inscription with what Lacouperie said he found in his Lolo manuscript, you have to turn the seal on its side. This is because Lacouperie wants us to believe that Indus inscriptions should be read, like the Lolo script, from top to bottom. Remarkably, the right- and left-most Harappan signs (or, as Lacouperie would have it, the top and bottom signs), which perfectly match Lacouperie’s Lolo characters, are both heavily mutilated, and in their normal forms don’t look anything like the symbols shown in the seal. The upshot is that Lacouperie’s reconstruction was faked from start to finish.

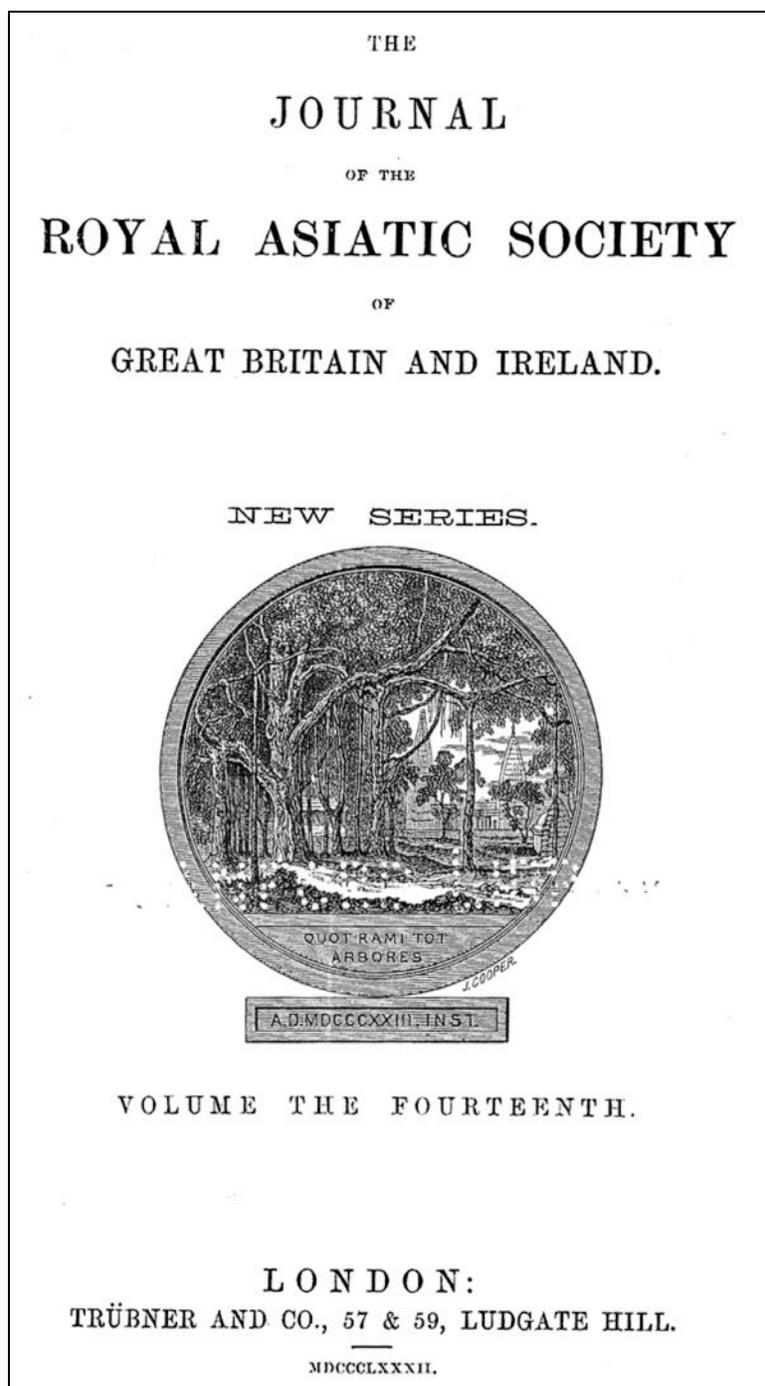
Compare Cunningham’s seal, on the left below, with Lacouperie’s Plate C. I’ve turned the seal on its side to facilitate the comparison. Lacouperie didn’t reproduce Cunningham’s whole seal in his article, undoubtedly because reading the inscription top to bottom results in the seal animal’s awkward upending. Another reason may lie in the fact that Lacouperie tweaked Cunningham’s transcription of the seals to get a better fit with his Lolo data. But you get used to procedures like this, including the hiding of inconvenient data, when you study the works of would-be Indus decipherers — recent as well as early ones:



On the left: The first Indus inscription found, shown in the reproduction printed by Cunningham in 1875. On the right, Plate C from Terrien de Lacouperie’s 1882 article. Note the close match between what Lacouperie claimed were the Harappan and Lolo signs, despite the fact that the right-most and left-most signs on the Indus inscription were clearly mutilated. (Also note that Lacouperie’s drawings don’t quite match Cunningham’s.) The arrows on the left show what comparison with closely related inscriptions suggest may have been the original form of the two symbols. (Cf. Mahadevan 1369, 1629, 2863, 5084, which differ only in the exact fish symbol used.) The identification of the left-most (lower-most) Indus symbol is not certain, but the fact that it is mutilated is beyond dispute.

It is a fact that odd path dependencies in historical fields often develop due to arbitrary directions taken by prominent early researchers. In the case of Indus studies, once Cunningham declared Indus symbols to be part of a 'script,' no one questioned his claim for over a century and a quarter. From this point on, heated debate raged over what language lay under the 'script,' but the fact that the signs encoded speech was never questioned. Many of the strange results that have followed from the naïve acceptance of that claim are well known.

Terrien de Lacouperie's original 1882 article follows. The punchline comes in the last two pages, where Lacouperie calls on the supposed affinities between the Lolo or Yi script and Cunningham's lone Indus seal to support a sweeping interpretation of the origins of Old World writing systems.



DECIPHERMENT OF THE LOLO WRITING

A.—EXAMPLES OF THE COMBINATIONS OF CHARACTERS

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>1. 4 (4) = 10</p> <p>2. 4 (4) = 10, 都</p> <p>3. 4 (4) = 鼎</p> <p>4. 4 (4) = 对</p> <p>5. 4 (4) = 天</p> <p>6. 4 (4) = 对</p> | <p>7. 7 (7) = 古</p> <p>8. 7 (7) = 谷</p> <p>9. 7 (7) = 九</p> <p>10. 7 (7) = 庚</p> <p>11. 7 (7) = 耕</p> <p>12. 7 (7) = 吃</p> |
|--|--|
-

B.—CHARACTERS IDENTIFIED.

| | | |
|-------|--------|-------|
| 7 = V | 8 = CH | 2 = L |
| 4 = O | 4 = P | 7 = X |
| 7 = K | 6 = F | 4 = Y |
| 4 = T | O = B | |
| O = S | 4 = N | |

C.—COMPARISON OF THE LOLO WRITING WITH THE LEGEND
OF THE HARAPA SEAL.

SEAL
FOUND AT
HARAPA, LAHORE.



CHARACTERS OF
THE LOLO M.S.

ART. X.—*On a Lolo MS. written on Satin.*¹

THIS splendid MS. on red and blue satin is, in fact, the first that has reached Europe in the language and writing of the Lolos,² almost unknown a few months ago; before the important *Journey of Exploration in Western Sz'e chuen*, by Mr. E. Colborne Baber, now Secretary of the Chinese Legation at Peking, noticed by him in a paper addressed to the Royal Geographical Society of this country. From this paper we learn that Mr. Baber displayed a remarkable diligence in procuring materials for the study of the language and writing of the Lolo population; his paper comprising a vocabulary, copy and tracing of three documents in the Lolo writing; but, till the arrival of this wonderful MS., it must be confessed that we had no other Lolo documents.

This MS., on satin, red on one side, blue on the other, in blue rough cloth boards, is folded in eight like a screen. It is written in black, apparently with the Chinese brush, and consists of texts of a considerable length, with nearly 5750 words in all.

The writing runs in lines from top to bottom, and from right to left, as in Chinese. It is disposed in separate rows of two characters, or several aggregated together.

On the red side we have six pieces, going under a general title on the board outside, and having each a separate title of

¹ The present note was read at a meeting of the Royal Asiatic Society, Dec. 19, 1881, by Col. Henry Yule, C.B., to whom the MS. had been offered from Peking by Mr. Colborne Baber, who had received it from a Lolo chief, in fulfilment of a promise made four years ago.

² The only documents we had previously on the Lolos, besides the short Chinese notices, were the notes from Father Crabouillet, of the Missions Etrangères of Paris (missionary for ten years in Se-chuen) in 1873. These notes have been published in the numbers of February, 1873, of a weekly paper, *Les Missions Catholiques*, published at Lyons. The Lolos cover an area of 50 leagues in length, and 30 to 40 in width, in the south-western part of the Se-chuen province of China. A branch of the same people exists in Indo-China.

four or six words, of which one or two are repeated in every title. Besides this, the first, second, and sixth are separated in two. The text is in verses of five words, separated by a circle at the right under the last word, as the Chinese do. Occasional verses of another measure occur. In the first piece we find two verses of three and one of seven words. The rhymes, which are conspicuous, do not follow or alternate with regularity; they are in some cases separated by several verses. On the red side, after the six pieces, we have two stanzas of five verses of four words, excepting the last, which has eleven words. A final phrase of nine words and two following terminates the writing on the red side, making a total of 2998 words.

The blue side numbers only 2750 words, and is not so well written as the red. The text is disposed in seven parts, each having a separate title of four, five, or six words. The first and sixth are separated in two. In contradistinction to the red side, the text runs unbroken and no traces of rhymes are visible in the first six parts. The seventh is composed of seventeen verses of five words, with rhymes and a concluding sentence.

Mr. Colborne Baber had previously received (but from the French Missionaries) a Lolo MS. not written with the brush, but yet more regularly written than that on the satin MS. This copy, which contains several texts, he had xylographed by the Chinese process and sent three copies to Europe. A list of the 450 different words of this xylographed text of 1850 words, which I compiled with great care and classified according to their graphical shape, displayed at once an extraordinary resemblance with the Rejang alphabet of Sumatra. We see in it the same system of combining the letters one with the other, and the same mode of embodying the vowel sign with the consonant; but it would have been difficult to go further without the materials Mr. Baber, with singular perseverance, secured during his journey. They consist of:

1. A bilingual or rather bi-written text, Lolo and Chinese, of 133 words (60 of which are different). It is a Lolo song, in verses of five words, in rhymes with a periodical return

of the same verses. Chinese characters, which seem hardly to have more than a phonetic value, accompany each Lolo word, so as to enable a Chinaman to read it. The two writings are much corrupted, and, in some cases, are decipherable only by comparison.

2. A small vocabulary of 19 words written in Mr. Baber's pocket book by a Lolo medicine-man, with the sense, but without the sounds.

As to the words of the language, we have in Roman characters :

a. A vocabulary of 230 words compiled by Mr. Baber.

b. A vocabulary of 72 words or articles extracted by the Rev. Dr. Edkins from Chinese sources.

c. A vocabulary of 130 words collected by the French explorer, M. Francis Garnier,¹ a list, showing that the decipherment of this remarkable writing is a matter only of attention and time, the words of the Lolo vocabulary in native writing, with the bilingual text, forming the clue to the whole.

The written words of this small vocabulary, which are found again in the bilingual document, with an approximate pronunciation in Chinese characters corresponding with the Roman transcription of the word in one or other of the three vocabularies, are decisive in this matter; we have only to take them as the starting-points of comparison with the other words of the bilingual document, to be able to deduce the phonetic value of the added characters. For example :

On the Lolo list we have a certain group for *seven*, which in the vocabulary is *shih*; on the bilingual document it is rendered by 草 *ch'o* or *tsö*; but this does not occur in any other word of the bilingual document.

On the Lolo list we have (the figures correspond to the Lolo characters on Plate A) :

(1) = ten, in the vocabulary *ts'é*.

(2) = five, in the vocabulary *to*; in the bilingual document 都 *to*.

¹ These vocabularies, however, taken on different spots, exhibit only slight differences; some are only due to phonetic decay.

We find, besides, on the bilingual document :

(3) = 𠵹 *twan*.

(4) = 𠵹 *it tui*.

(5) = 天 *tien*.

(6) = 𠵹 *tui*.

From these six examples it is easy to deduce the form of the character for *t*.

In this case, as in the preceding one, we have to take into account that the spoken vocabulary belongs to a dialect more phonetically decayed than the written ones.

In the bilingual document we find (see Plate A) :

(7) = 古 *ku*.

(8) = 谷 *kuh*.

(9) = 九 *kiu*.

(10) = 庚 *keng*.

(11) = 耕 *keng*.

(12) = 吃 *kut*.

It is not difficult to see what in these six examples the character for *k* is, and that in the last compound we find again the character for *t*.

Continuing the same process, which here would be tedious if more fully exemplified, we have already found a certain number of the characters, as those for *v*, *o*, *k*, *t*, *s*, *ch*, *p*, *f*, *b*, *m*, *l*, *n*, *y*, which are figured in the accompanying Plate (B).

The number of the whole seems to be under thirty.

The importance of the writing discovered by Mr. Baber cannot be overrated. It gives us the link which was wanting to understand the connexion between the various members of a family of writings widely disseminated.¹

¹ A number of writings of that family may be enumerated in their geographical order, which in several cases is *not* due to their connection, derivation, and age, as follows: (a) *India*—Harapa seal, Indo-Pali, Vatteluttu; (b) *Indo-China*—Lolo, Laos; (c) *Sumatra*—Old Battak, Rejang, Lampung; (d) *Celebes*—Old Bugis, Macassar; (e) *Philippines*—Tagal (pre-Arabic Malay); and (f) *Northern*—Corean, Hifumi Japanese. The whole question is treated, with the necessary illustrations of characters, in my paper *On the Eastern Alphabet and the Indo-Chinese Origin of the Indian Writing*, which will soon appear in the *Journal of the R.A.S.*

Its interest is shown by four remarkable facts :

1. The intimate connexion of the Lolo characters with the legend of the stone seal found at Harapa, near Lahore,¹ in an excavation undertaken for the Archæological Survey of India by Major Clarke, which from archæological evidence General Cunningham assigns to four or five hundred years before the Christian Era.

2. Its extraordinary resemblance with the Rejang and connected writings on one side, and the Corean and Hifumi Japanese on the other.

3. Its remote affinities with the Indo-Pali, the last exhibiting in some cases more corrupted shapes of characters.

4. Its many affinities with the Siao-chuen Chinese writing in use a few centuries B.C.

TERRIEN DE LA COUPERIE, M.R.A.S.

LONDON, *Dec.* 19, 1881.

¹ See the Plate C.